Painters and Sculptors of Modern America

PAINTERS
AND SCULPTORS
OF MODERN
AMERICA

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Introduction by MONROE WHEELER

NEW YORK
THOMAS Y. CROWELL COMPANY
1942

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
NEW YORK

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HEINZ WARNEKE

My first memories are concerned with a low brick house in the province of Hanover. My father was Freight Manager for northeastern Germany, so, though we did not live on a farm, but in the midst of a great farming district, our home had its *Diele,* a spacious sort of hay-loft and wagon space under the same roof as the house proper, an arrangement typical of that section. On our door was, and still is, a brass plate with the name Heinrich Warneke. The name has been there for generations. My first steps out this door took me into my mother's garden, neat, and at the same time gay with its brick walks and carefully tended flower beds. My mother, a small energetic woman, still keeps the garden blooming, with true German ardor for flowers.

Over, or rather through the garden fence, I looked as a little child out upon a bright green plain, extending beyond eyesight—the river basin of the Weser with land black and fertile like that of the Nile regions. By the time I was old enough to wander outside the garden gates without causing my elders anxiety there was a brother in our house, and after a few years a third son. To be truthful, these events did not interest me overmuch and I rarely played with my brothers as we grew up. They played with the other children of the countryside and I lived alone all day, following my own pursuits which I felt to be very urgent. In reality I was not alone, for I was walking about in the midst of the goats, the geese, the colts, in the farmyards, sitting close to the nesting birds in the hedgerows along the brooks, and following intently the small wild things in the woods and marshes. The warm afternoons found me lying in the shade of some willow by our brook, watching the clouds pile up beyond the Weser. In them I saw bigger, wilder horses, dogs changing into fierce lions or dragons, and the faces of men laughing like jolly farmers or frowning in menace, and all of them seemed gigantic, animated sculptures.

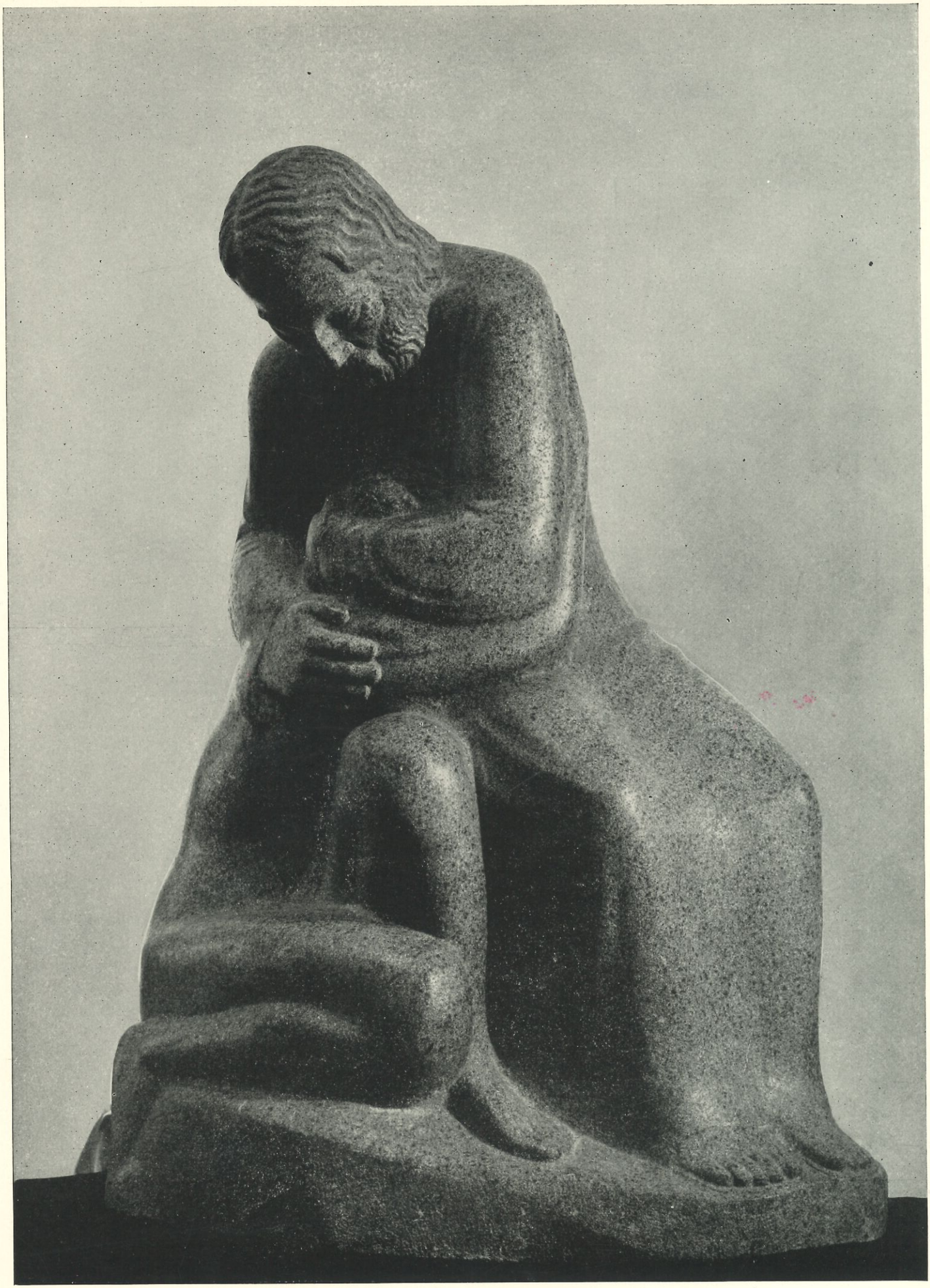
There is no recollection in my mind of having been lonely, though I was certainly shy. My first days at the village school were happy in the circumstance of a very gentle and sympathetic schoolmaster. It was the custom to soften the first school day of the little six-year-olds by a present of candy or cookies. In my case the schoolmaster had suggested to my father that he send a box of paints. It was a grown-up box of the best quality and anyone can imagine my wonder and desperate attachment to them. By that time I had already formed the habit of drawing and crayoning the pictures of my daily companions—the chickens, colts and field-mice. My very first drawing I can remember distinctly—my model was a nice fat, bright orange carrot.

My schooldays continued in the same even, happy tenor. I was tormented with arithmetic, grammar, and all those essentials to the least possible extent. My teacher never heard of progressive education, but he didn't need to, and as long ago as that there was at least one child who acquired his education painlessly—for I *can* read, write and count. However, I must say that he, the schoolmaster, never saw me idle. In fact, no one ever dreamed of being idle in the province of Hanover—it was, and remains today, a land of industrious people.

As a rule I spent my vacations near Syke at my grandfather's, which was a summer hotel with streams, fields and forests, bordering the state hunting preserves. My brothers and cousins were there too, mostly boys whose games of torturing frogs and what-not filled me with amazement and misery. At home we had woods, but at Syke there were real forests full of wild animals. Every morning I was up early to see the deer venture out of the dark shadows. First my searching eyes were aware of a movement among the dim tree trunks—it always took a few seconds to locate it—the antlered head of a large buck. Then suddenly they came leaping the barrier into my grandfather's uplands; each company headed by its buck, then the does and fawns, leaping, leaping, leaping in scarcely rounded silhouette against the soft light of the paling sky. There were also the more fearsome wild boars. How they got out I can't recall, but it was to a young boy an even greater thrill to see those hideous beasts surge forth and attack a field of nicely growing potatoes or root vegetables for all the world like a company of tractor plows. In spite of my grandfather's consternation, I was always elated when a morning's watch was rewarded by the sight of wild boars—I, of course, being all the time carefully hidden in one of the outlying barns. So, through the vacations of my childhood and youth, I returned home each year with a great sheaf of drawings and modeled sketches, mostly of deer and wild boars. It was actually at Syke that sculpture first took hold of me.

There was a brick factory not far away and the small trains bringing the clay to the kilns naturally spilled off many a chunk along the tracks. These chunks furnished my first modeling material. In the parlor cabinet in Hanover is my first sculpture—a hen hovering over her chickens—made from the forbidden clay. I passed the brickyard only a few years ago and could still feel a twinge of conscience for I had been strictly forbidden by my grandparents to go near it. There was actual danger for a small boy because of the deep dug-out places that had filled with brackish water.

During these early years I had certain more mundane hours when I went to the nearby city of Bremen with my mother and usually my next younger brother. This happened four or five times a year and my mother soon discovered that I was infatuated with the sights to be seen in the very excellent Colonial Museum right by the station. She was glad enough to be relieved of one of her charges, for she had countless household errands and many relatives to visit, so, from the time I was five years old, I was left in the museum, and even today I can



Heinz Warneke: The Prodigal Son. Granite, 1938. Slightly over Life Size

hardly get by its doors. The guards all knew me and I'm sure any uneasiness on their part must soon have been overcome, for I was a biddable child and anyhow was too intent in my inspections to think of touching anything as I drifted about hour after hour. There were very finely presented scenes of colonial tribal life, and the implements and their daily uses as set forth in these tableaux fascinated me, but in the end it was the African wood sculpture that held my attention. The simple naïve carving of a bird or an ox—what was the secret of so much expressiveness? Without formulating a definite answer I must have understood, for as soon as I was home again and out of my city clothes I would dash out to stare even more piercingly at the neighbor's pigs, geese and horses. Then I would pick up a piece of pear or apple wood on the way home and go to work with my pocket-knife, sitting on the doorstep.

As I look back and search for the essence of those formative years, I find outward tranquility and inward feverishness. It seemed to me that I could not see enough, that my eyes were always boring into things—and there were so many things.

* * *

AT THE AGE of sixteen came the first break from this happy setting. My unhampered wanderings in fields and woods were over. I now went daily to Bremen to study at the city art school. No one ever thought of any other possible future for me except that of an artist. It was a congenial prospect, of course, and I worked hard, only coming home late at night, often midnight, and leaving again at six. It was almost impossible for me to notice anything, so absorbing were my first real art lessons. Yet I do remember some Polish laboring squads. There was a transatlantic shipping company near the railroad station and here, as I passed to school each day, I saw the groups of Poles collected together before their going off to America, the land of release from their drudgery. I often wondered if emigration were not a much too active word. These dumb, dogged men and their trail of pregnant women and clinging children—it was a sight I shall never forget. My heart awoke to a sense of pain—yet as if for creatures scarcely human, and in tragic contrast I often recalled the silhouette of the deer against the skyline at Syke—the male leaping free and bold followed by his women-folk and his young.

But mostly I kept this to myself. I scarcely seemed to exist and was quite unaware of where, when and how I slept or ate. The first person to pierce my reserve, or shell of unawareness, I might say, was Professor Charles Blossfeldt with whom I began to study two years later in Berlin. He is known for his book *Die Pflanze*, and it was while he was collecting material for it that I made his acquaintance. In fact, our relationship soon changed from teacher-student to that of fellow enthusiasts as I went along to help him on many country excursions in this most congenial search for plant material. He gained my affection and admiration as he made me peer through his ever present magnifying glass whereby he changed tiny details of plant life to motifs for iron grillwork, stone pillars, or even skyscrapers. This was many years ago, but sculpture under his encouragement became for me for the first time a search for more than faithful representation.

I also studied with Professor Maximillian Shafer, a very sympathetic teacher who knew how to make the study of anatomy anything but dry. His theory was to stress the function of bones, joints and muscles—a study of action and strain with live models for demonstration. For years I worked as well with Professor Haverkamp, a thorough, strictly academic teacher of portraiture and figure work—severe training, but I am convinced with no harm done. From Professor Wackerle, on the other hand, I learned the decorative approach to art, and especially the technique of wood and stone carving. These are the men to whom I owe the most. There were the other usual courses, such as ceramics, history of art. Our vacations were to be used, and mine were so used, in practical application of our studies—explicitly, in carving stone or wood in a master sculptor's studio or a shop where actual commissions were in process of execution. Thus we came out of school with a great deal more than mere theories. As it happened, when I went to Berlin I was entered in classes far in advance of my age and preparation. It meant that I must exert terrific pressure to keep up and also that I grew up among men and women much older than myself. I never went out except to be in the country and had few moments of diversion, though I enjoyed my fellow students in general —particularly those who would join me in country hikes or skating.

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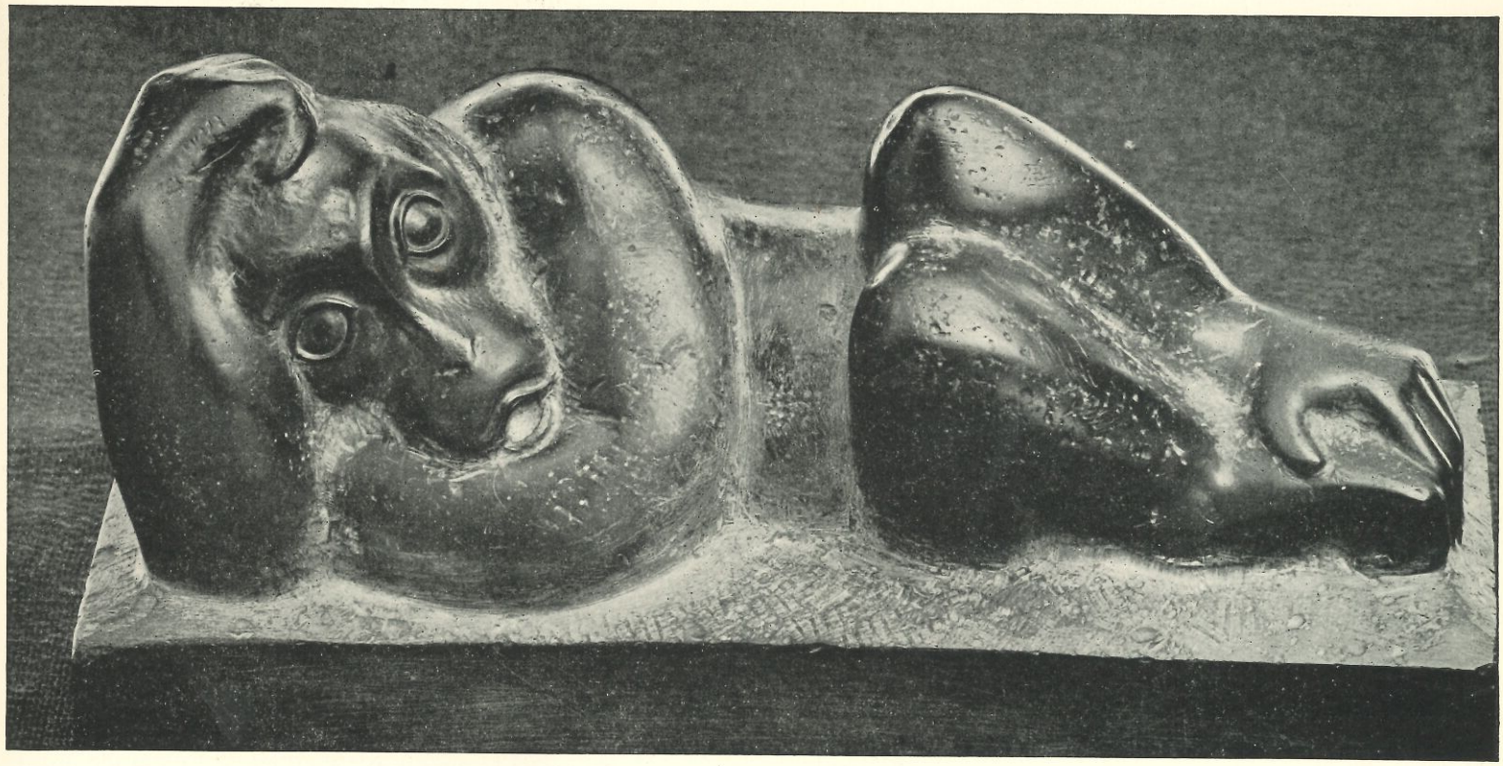
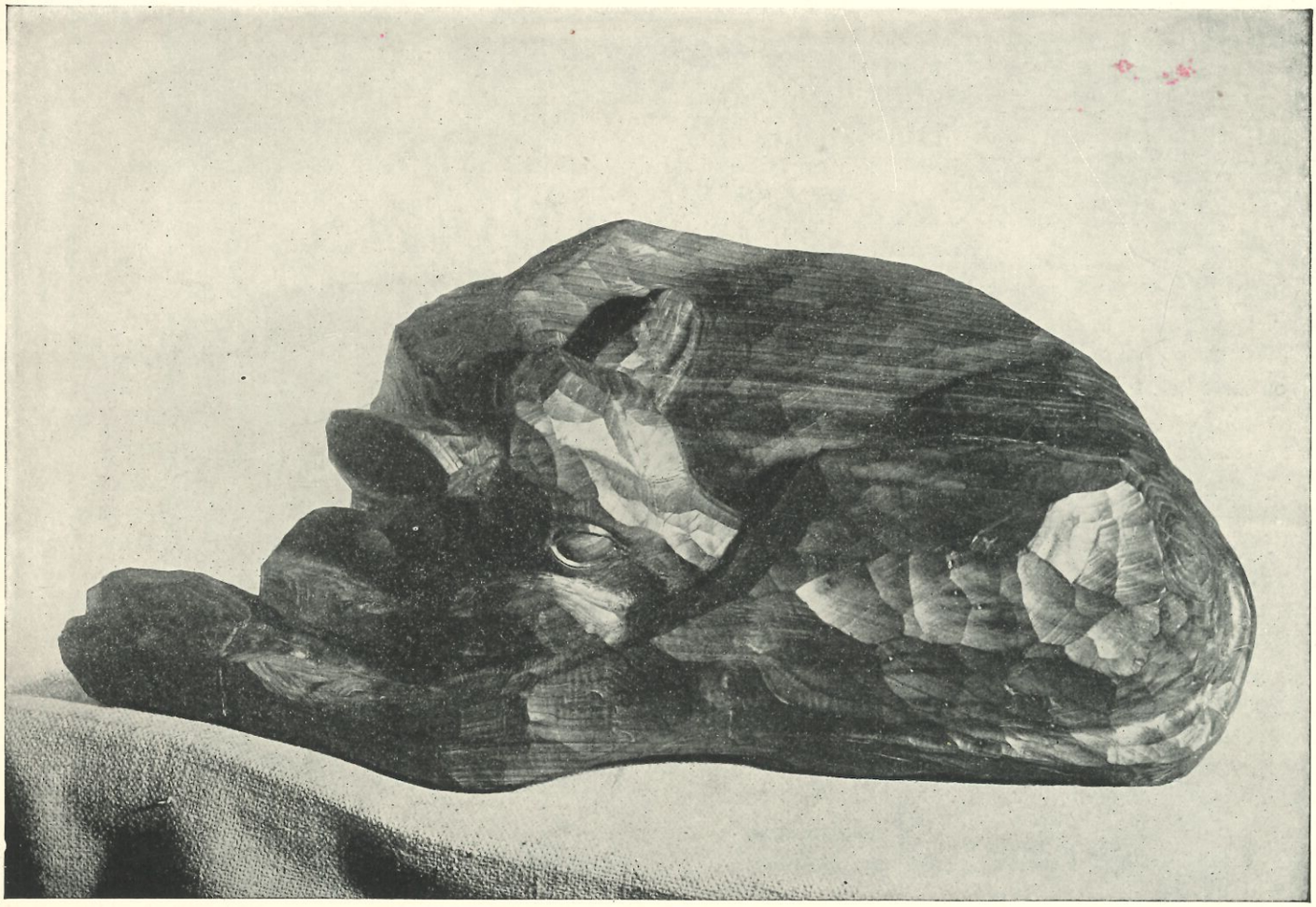
THEN CAME THE World War to interrupt this pattern of study and in the end to waste four very valuable years. I think we were stunned by the suddenness with which we young men were all sent for, examined, and placed in regiments, for I can't seem to remember any of my sensations at this critical moment. Fortunately for me, before I had to go into active service I was appointed by the War Ministry to go to Bucharest and serve on the staff in charge of War Memorials. It was a wonderful lesson in how to loaf. In looking idly out of my office window I learned a great deal about humanity. As the months and finally the years went by, and I was associated with the same men and officers, I came to know a side of human nature that I had passed by before in my intense interest in looking at life as an artist. The average man and the motives that actuate him still are not of particular interest to me; but, at least I know from these years of what stuff such men are made and that, perhaps, is not wasted knowledge. Often, too, my work took me out among the gypsies and to the remote villages of those wild natives where I encountered truly barbarous human beings and such a primitive approach to the problems of life that I can scarcely believe in retrospect the actuality of scenes that I saw myself.

Then came my return to Berlin at the end of the war after a perilous escape through the mountains that lasted six



Heinz Warneke: Orang-Outang Thinking. Belgian Marble, 1933. 12 x 6 Inches



Heinz Warneke: New-Born Calf. Chestnut, 1934. Actual Size

COURTESY MILCH GALLERIES

weeks and was punctuated by attacks by bandits, train wrecks, and quite primitive scenes on our own part in order to avoid starvation. It seems as if all that had happened to someone else. In Berlin a master's studio awaited me at the Kunstgewerbe Museum. And it might be well to explain what such a studio implied. It would correspond to a laboratory put at the disposal of a man working for an M. A. or Ph. D. All classroom study was over and the graduate student was free to experiment, which usually meant the search for an individual style—realistic or abstract, long, attenuated women or well-rounded, substantial ladies and so on. It is a wonderful system. The search for my own style led me steadily toward simplification and during this happy period I had time to carve away in both wood and brass. It didn't last long. The inflation came to render life intolerable, a statue sold one day would the next day buy a sandwich or maybe an egg, if one could find the sandwich or the egg. There was never anything left with which to buy material for the next statue.

* * *

ONE DAY SUDDENLY it was too much. I began to pack my things and make arrangements to emigrate to the United States as quickly as possible.

This was in 1923 and since my family had friends in St. Louis I went there where I should not be entirely among strangers. They were sympathetic and did everything to help me, yet it was a scary business. However, I had come with determination; even street-cleaning had entered my mind as a possibility and, I assure you, that would have been acceptable, for in an undertaking of this sort there is no turning back. Happily, I had no such taxing experience and in a few days I found work as sculptor for an artificial stone company. Street-cleaning was avoided but as time went on it was discouraging to find myself so often obliged to take commercial jobs. Also, commissions for portrait busts were done for patrons who had in many cases never heard of modern art. Those who had heard of it regarded it generally as a sort of obscenity. It was frequently a choice between shelter and food on one hand and my sense of the decorative and the significant on the other. I began to wish I could develop an insouciance about rent and electricity bills. My years of thoroughly academic study with Professor Haverkamp were at this time very useful. A few persons were appreciative of my own individual style but the general taste in St. Louis began to exercise an insidious influence. I was financially successful but grew dissatisfied with my own work.

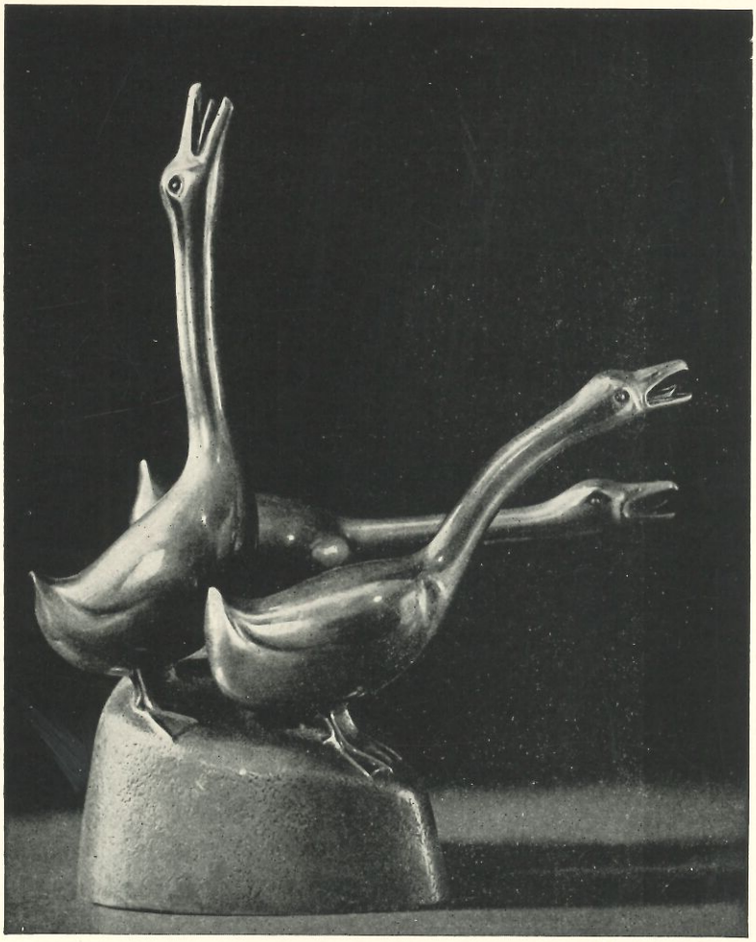
It was necessary to take another step in the dark and, encouraged by my future wife, I decided to move to New York. To have the agony of uncertainty over with as quickly as possible, I arranged for my first one-man show in America. It was at the Milch Galleries and I felt that upon it hung my fate as an artist. If New York did not like my carved wood and brasses then the game was up as far as my own soul was concerned. I was in process of becoming an American citizen and all my hopes were centered here. Fortunately, the results were gratifying and with what I had earned in St. Louis as the substance and the appreciation of the New York public as a stimulus, I was able once again to devote a few years to my own work in my own way. This could be most conveniently accomplished in Paris where plaster-casters, foundries and wood merchants are just around the corner in the two artists' quarters; so we began to spend several months of each year in Paris (by this time it was "we").

Some of my best work was the outcome—a pensive *Monkey* in limestone, *The Hissing Geese* in the brass medium that I enjoy so much, the *Three Percheron Colts*, a regular series of cats including *Tom Cat* in black marble, inspired by the toughest alley cat in all Paris and *Mother Cat and Kittens*, and, finally, *The Wild Boars*. The *Tom Cat* gave me a lot of fun—I could easily have pictured him in corduroy trousers with a dirty wool scarf around his neck and a cap pulled down over one eye—but *The Wild Boars* I consider the best realized. This piece of work has given me real satisfaction and that's a lot. The observations of my boyhood during the visits to my grandfather's at Syke had taken shape and substance. The position I chose was dictated a bit by the material, for I wanted to work in Belgian granite; but it also represents a moment that I had as a boy always found most breathless. As I worked I could see this pair sitting in the dark of the forest edge listening and sniffing before the charge into the open fields.

Another piece that I'm quite devoted to is my *Orang-Outang Thinking*, called Lon by the family, *i.e.*, "League of Nations." I also started Lon in Paris but couldn't finish him till a few years later. The depression came. The cobblestones of la rue de Chatillon and the heart of our landlord suddenly impressed us with their unresponsiveness, so in 1932 we packed all the dreadful sculptor's accumulation and gave up the studio in Paris. Among the unfinished pieces that I shipped home was a granite group that has taken most of my spare time in the summer months since. I call it *The Prodigal Son*. Granite is a slow material, but most rewarding of all.

* * *

SINCE 1932, when we left Paris entirely, we have lived in a section of Connecticut bordering the Connecticut River. It is remote and wild, and so within my financial reach. Here I have a small studio but I have not yet entirely escaped from cobblestones for, up till now, it has seemed advisable to do most of my work in New York City and there again are the very cobblestones of Paris, in Washington Mews. While I was working at something one day about two years ago a letter came from Washington in a vague way asking if I shouldn't like to do something for New York. I immediately saw myself given free rein with a lifelong endowment to carve out another cathedral of Chartres right in the middle of New York City. It turned out to be The Harlem Housing Project which needed some sculpture and a supervisor for the work, or so the Government kindly decided. Under the Treasury Relief Art Project a congenial group of sculptors spent somewhat more than a year in my studio producing what we felt to be



Heinz Warneke: Hissing Geese. Carved Brass, 1927. 12 Inches High

COURTESY MILCH GALLERIES

COURTESY MILCH GALLERIES

Heinz Warneke: Deer Startled. Carved Brass, 1921. 5 Inches High

embellishment for the apartments of the colored families who were to be lucky enough to live there. However, it was not only these colored people who benefited by the T. R. A. P. activity, for the sculptors were all men who had come to a financial dead end and, of course, a profound discouragement. To find sculpture suddenly a factor in rehabilitation, to realize that our existence, not only as men, but as part of civilized life, was of consequence—that was the thing. The very faces of my new friends changed as the work progressed and we have gone on steadily from there.

As soon as my bas-relief for the Interior Building is cast in stone and in place in Washington I shall be free to work more steadily out in the country where I love to be. Here I find myself once again among forests and hunting preserves full of deer and other game, though our pigs are decidedly tame ones. There are fruit trees too—apple, peach, and even plum, albeit with a measly yield. Yet at dusk I hear the woodcocks singing above the marsh, more melodious than the plovers of my boyhood, and I wander on my own acres among the gentle hills of the Connecticut River valley, far more beautiful than the plains of the Weser, lush as they were. Our house is old, full of the sense of human life, and I am easily at home though none of my forefathers has lived in it before me. There are dogs and a changing population of farm animals—some we have *eaten*. Here it was that while acting as midwife to one of our Jerseys I had the impulse to make a wood-carving of the newborn calf. I rushed across the road to where I had noticed a huge fallen chestnut. I hacked out a good sized piece of the trunk and with the same axe chopped out the likeness of the young creature. As I started the work beside the barn under a tree the calf moved about in the straw seeking greater comfort. The unaccustomed air in his nostrils was too cool (where he had come from a few minutes previously there had been no chilly air). He shoved his nose under a hind leg and so I did him.

* * *

I AM ASKED for my "philosophy of art" and that granite statue makes clear to me one idea that I have on the subject, namely, that a law to the effect that every statue must be carved from granite only and by the sculptor himself, "taille directe," would have a marvelous effect on the quantity and quality of our American sculpture. What a relief could be expected from mannered and boresome detail! In other words, my personal inclination is toward the quiet, the simple and the direct statement. But by all means, a statement, and if possible one dear to the heart or mind of the artist. Sculpture that resolves itself into a mere brilliant assemblage of rhythms and planes is entertaining for a moment—certainly not longer to me. I am speaking of my own taste throughout and I leave room for other manners and other interests for other men. So again, for me, to obtain a real work of art the *sine qua non* is an inner impulse. A work of art should be the result of an artist's own intense interest, something which he receives or perceives through his senses, develops in his own mind and heart during a real gestation period, usually of years, until the conception is ready for birth—all of which is by no means a new idea. This is where the question of commissions comes in, and "sculpture is the handmaiden of architecture." At the present moment all I can say is, "Happy is the sculptor whose commissions can be executed out of the fabric of his own life."

I admire the simplicity of American architecture immensely, even if it cannot use sculpture very well. Another time and when I'm a bit older I may have more to say. However, I know this, that I am first and last a sculptor and shall never enjoy any sculpture that is obviously not personal in some way to the man who made it. There are many, too many, excellent sculptors' libraries in the homes of my fellow artists; but perhaps if I were more prosperous I'd own more of a one myself!

The younger sculptors are not so guilty on this score: their work is therefore less dry. My philosophy of art is likely to become a classroom lecture, yet I must say that I wish the young men and women were not in quite such a hurry to exhibit, suggesting thereby that they feel themselves a finished product, as it were. They do not study long enough nor thoroughly enough to learn how to say what they have to say. The interest in all these internal impulses and fervors is at the expense of a great deal of technic, and the result is a sort of boomerang misfortune. I am reminded of my student days in Bremen when it was not considered by the professors beside the point for me to have a thorough training in practical silver work. I was entered as apprentice in a factory in Hemelingen working till four in the afternoon, then I went to the art classes from five to seven and, after a sandwich, from seven to nine. So, while I learned to paint and sculpt, I also was taught at the silver factory how to design everything that anybody ever saw made of silver, then to make the models and piece-molds for these articles, how to cast different metals in sand, how to finish the model so that it could be used for endless reproductions, and so on — just a convenient sideline. It is perhaps a case of German thoroughness that runs into exaggeration, but at the end of it I was in no doubt about one thing: that it takes time and much training to master an artisan's trade — much less an art. So, I do believe emphatically in the advantage of plenty of knowledge on the part of the artist. That is where the older man is ahead and if such a man's work is sincere, even though detailed and realistic, I can enjoy it more than an ignorantly done, showy piece of modernism. After all, most modern sculpture consists in the elimination or softening down of subordinate detail, an accent upon the telling detail or main idea — if there is any. To do this you have to know a lot about the whole before you can successfully begin to discard parts. As a rule there has not been enough study of animals and men as they live — in youth, in old age, in joy, in sorrow — and far from enough observation of the effect that these things have on anatomy. To know and to put the stress on the telling muscles, or joints, or whole portion of the anatomy, is the secret of the talent to put life into one's work. This is what interests me personally — and this is enough of one man's ideas.

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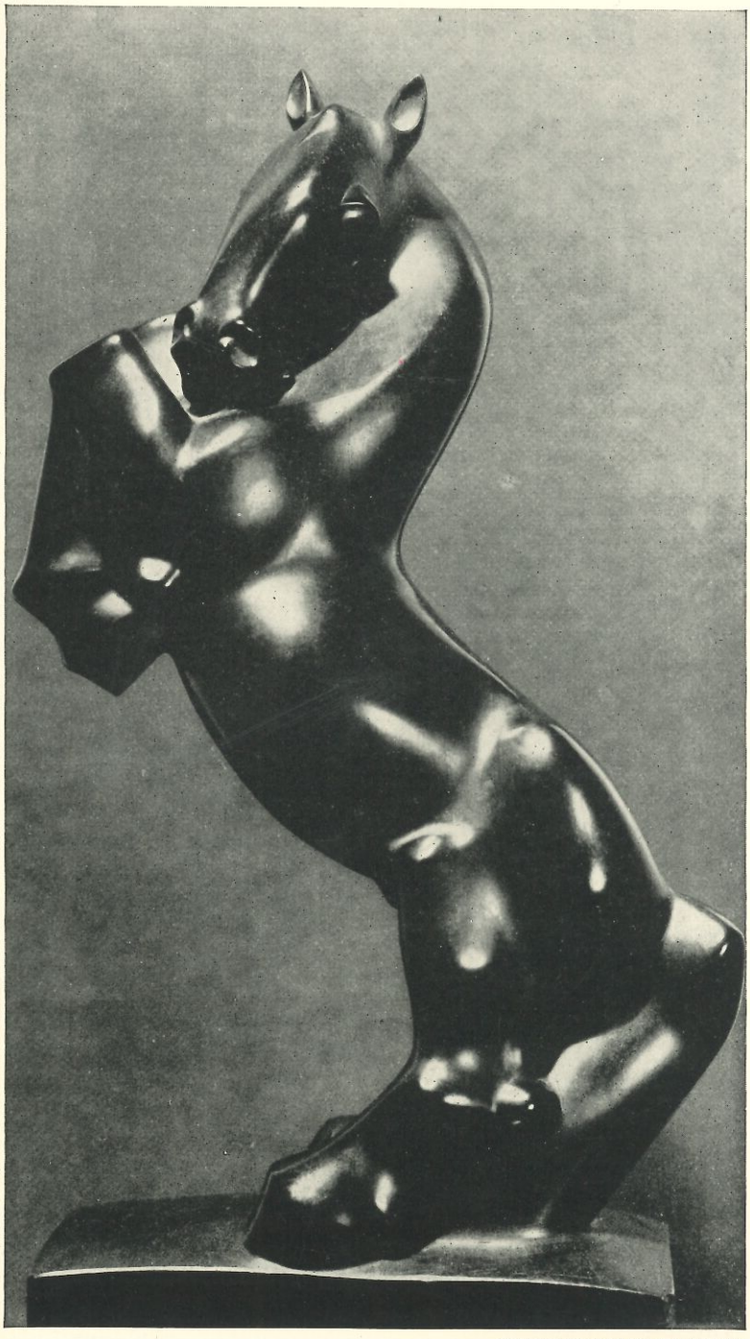
Heinz Warneke: Mother Cat and Kittens. Belgian Granite, 1927. Actual Size



COURTESY MILCH GALLERIES

Heinz Warneke: Rearing Stallion. Ebony, 1922. 15 Inches High